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Malajube and fans have an understanding

AARON LYNETT CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

Malajube (from left): Francis Mineau, Julien Mineau, Mathieu Cournoyer and Thomas Augustin.

'We knew in advance that we'd never have a worldwide hit ... because people identify with English lyrics in rock. ... But that's not necessarily what we want. We wanted to stay free and true to ourselves.'

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

It seems like only yesterday that the Québécois indie band Malajube was becoming seriously worn down by a two-year ad hoc tour around the planet, 265 shows in 16 countries, starting in 2006.

Life in their van had been reduced to a string of cigarettes and crossword puzzles. Singer-guitarist Julien Mineau says that too many burgers and too much junk food was making him fat and sick. The hat in the form of a bear's head that band members occasionally wore had grown fungus.

In their 100th gig, at a Toronto club, keyboardist Thomas Augustin dove into an unsuspecting crowd – which promptly parted, causing Augustin to land on his face.

Drummer Francis Mineau, Julien's brother, feared the quartet might "implode." They worried that after great notices – from The New York Times and Spin to Pitchfork and Playboy – they might be considered merely as yet another flavour-of-the-month if they didn't find the time to hunker down for the follow-up to their sophomore album Trompe l'oeil. Not to mention the pressure to top it artistically.

"Spending four to six hours in a van every day was exhausting, and you wonder at some point how much it really benefits you," Julien said. "I think we'd prefer doing more albums."

But the opportunity to make a dent in the U.S. and global market knocks but once for a franco phone band that insists it will not sing in English to gain success. (No matter that even French-speakers have a hard time comprehending lyrics buried in the band's boisterous and densely multi-layered mix.) Only time will tell whether the appealing exoticism of a different language – "Here's a tagline to save the music industry: See a show, learn a language!" quipped one publication – will evolve into a more solid following.

Now comes their third release, the magnificently ambitious Labyrinthes (in stores since Tuesday), and they're ready to do it all over again. First up, two nights at the fabled old La Tulipe theatre (next Tuesday and Wednesday), then a short tour of Quebec, followed by New Orleans, the U.S. east coast, and returns to Europe and Japan. This time, the quartet will spend less time touring, letting Labyrinthes speak for itself.

"There were big expectations for this album," said Julien, whose voice is soft and serious, reflecting humility and calm resoluteness. "But we didn't want to think too much about the business side. We just mainly wanted to please ourselves. We didn't want to think about music we did in the past or about the future. If we thought about all that, there might be more songs that could get played on mainstream radio. It's less profitable this way, but I think listeners would rather get into what the group is trying to do than listen to a total pop group. We also thought about the fact that we're still young and still have the time to do good pop."

In an arena where rock critics try to out-hip the others, they run through hoops in tackling the so-called language barrier. The Seattle Weekly: "With Malajube, anything is possible. The music is pretty chaotic, playful, and catchy as hell. Granted, I can't tell you what exactly they're singing about – cranberry juice? Crabs? Tourette's syndrome? Runny noses? I'm still going to sing along as if I did." (Augustin spent a lot of time after shows translating the lyrics for fans.)

The Toronto weekly Eye professed its review of Labyrinthes by stating, "Can we just go ahead and name Malajube the greatest francophone rock band in the history of the universe?" then supercilliously concluded, "Add Malajube to the argument against separatism."

Pitchfork, the influential alt-music Internet site, raved that "their approach to indie rock is so resolutely of-the-moment that it seems filled with hyper-modern allusions." (Uh, whatever that means.) Jon Pareles of the New York Times got it right when he noted that they're "fond of over-stuffed arrangements that flaunt their melodies with manic glee."

Rifling their extensive press clippings, these words were employed to describe Malajube: indie noisemiks, rocky magpies, cerebral, gothic, spook-rock, ramshackle, reckless, gleeful, whirligig, euphoric, ebullient, exuberant, haywire, melodramatic, sweeping, chaotic, playful, surreal and, of course, joie de vivre.

But success can breed antipathy on their home turf. They were slagged for having one of their songs used in a Zellers commercial, and tagged as middle class boys gone spoiled. And, reviewing Labyrinthes, veteran Le Devoir music critic Sylvain Cormier assailed their "dark adolescent poetry ... bad living badly expressed ... the same blitzkrieg: repetitive hammering ... all this is overestimated."

If rock and its offshoots have an innate ability to absorb disparate influences far more transparently – and casually – than any other musical genre, then Malajube threaten to be international poster boys for this crucial quality. Their mastery of the rock-pop vocabulary gives them huge range, from soaring melodies to industrial noise, from pure pop to prog-rock, often in the same song. Francis Mineau has described their style as "somewhere between the sound of a bird singing and the noises you can hear in a metal shop."

Labyrinthes, they say, is less of a Montreal album than Trompe-l'oeil. That album's most popular song, Montréal-40C, became an anthem for the claustrophobic state of mind winter imposes on its citizens (the video shoot was brutal because it took place outside in the middle of said winter). The song was among 49, chosen by CBC listeners, that were sent to Barack Obama for him to better understand Canada.

All in their 20s, the group – which also includes bassist Mathieu Cournoyer in addition to the Mineau brothers and Augustin, all high school friends from Sorel – listened to "the Beatles of course, (because) they're the start of everything," said Francis, as well as Weezer, Nirvana, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, King Crimson and "all that strange music from a long time ago."

Julien added: "We started out singing in English because that was the language of the good music we liked. But things got better from day to day when we decided to sing in French, which made the music more real. I think that was the turning point.

"We knew in advance that we'd never have a worldwide hit like no matter what American thing, because people identify with English lyrics in rock. We knew that most of the people on the planet wouldn't understand us singing in French. But that's not necessarily what we want. We wanted to stay free and true to ourselves."

"The musical hooks can make the lyrics a little stranger than usual."
Julien Mineau

They eventually attracted the attention of Gourmet Delice, founder of Montreal indie combine Bonsound, who in November 2004 released their first album Compte Complet (produced by Martin Pelland of The Dears) on its subsidiary label Dare to Care with the promise it could sell more than 1,000 copies. "No way!" they thought, but that was before the album became a mainstay on local community and college radio stations.

Fourteen months later came Trompe-l'oeil, with cameos by separatist rap trio Loco Locass, singer-songwriter Pierre Lapointe and members of The Dears. It was Lapointe, the young prince of Québécois chanson, who delivered a heartfelt plea at an ADISQ Awards gala for mainstream radio stations to start adding Malajube to their playlists. The album was shortlisted for the Polaris Prize, which translated into rest-of-Canada awareness of the group. In November 2006, they created the proverbial buzz at the CMJ Music Marathon, the premier indie-rock showcase ("An absolute highlight of the entire marathon," opined stereogum.com). Arcade Fire insisted Malajube open for them in Europe. And keyboardist Augustin formed the spin-off group Jacquemort.

There is something compelling ly quixotic about trying to find a worldwide audience – so accustomed to English as rock's lingua franca – while singing in French. French rock and pop has been the butt of hipster jokes forever, perhaps because of the omnipresence of France's ersatz Elvis, Johnny Hallyday, perhaps because of its slavish dependence on strict rules regarding lyric-writing, perhaps simply because of Frenchy accents. So much for hipsters. And when Spin and the New York Times discovered the so-called Montreal sound in 2005, "you got the impression you were in an English city," Cournoyer said. No matter, because francophone bands like Malajube (including label-mates Les Breastfeeders) used the exposure accorded Arcade Fire et al as an inspiration.

"The new generation is more and more open to discovering other cultures," Julien said. "People are interested in the same things, whether it's religion or capitalism, but it's really marvellous to have people listening when we express them our own way.

"The problem with many francophone artists is that the lyrics are accented up front and for that you really have to write well. Our lyrics are less like chanson but more like petites pensées. The musical hooks can make the lyrics a little stranger than usual."

"It's very difficult to compose music that's totally parallel to the lyrics, because music is much stronger than the words you start with. Emotions are stronger in the music than the words, for me at least."
Julien Mineau

While their lyrics often dwell on death and disease – family and friends were stricken by cancer and other ailments over the last few years – not everything is dark, said Julien, who is fond of saying that "one day I'm going to be eaten by bugs," a thought echoed in the rather jaunty and uplifting Les Collemboles.

"Often the lyrics are sombre, but other times they're just paroles or plays-on-words. True, the lyrics are triggered by real fears – it's a dark and sad world – but it's not all total despair. The hopeful side is in the music. Maybe one day we'll be able to come out with totally joyous music, who knows?"

Their sound is as dense and hyper kinetic that they're arch modernists, yet they use a time-tested rock vocabulary that stretches deep into the past. Consider Julien's obsession with a 1955 Wurlitzer, which he found on eBay after their tour.

"It sounds more natural, it's more organic to the touch. It's like a combination of guitar and piano. I didn't even know the Wurlitzer existed, because it came way before my time. You get the sensation that it's a real machine, not just an electronic circuit that makes so-called perfect notes. There are more recent keyboards on Labyrinthes, but it was nice to get a contrast of sounds. I play a guitar from the 1960s. It's fun to play instruments that are three times older than I am. The sounds are purer than from the 1980s and 1990s."

And consider their choice of locales for the recording of Labyrinthes: the old wood-panelled RCA Victor Studio, one of half a dozen state-of-the-art studios RCA built across North America in the early 1940s: "There's a lot of history in that studio and you can feel it." After putting in two weeks of 12-hour days composing material from jams, they spent another month on touch-ups at Julien's large Victorian house in Ste. Ursule, a village of about 1,500 people where he moved 18 months ago for some peace and quiet.

With Julien adding lyrics afterward to fit the mood, their sound might be considered aleatory (or chance) music, yet the final renderings are anything but ad hoc.

"On the preceding album, we took three months off and on in studio, then three or four months for the touch-ups and mixing. It was hard to see the finish line. This time, we wanted to compose in the studio and do it as quickly as possible, and above all enjoy ourselves. It's a more homogeneous sound, yet each tune is totally different from the other.

"It's very difficult to compose music that's totally parallel to the lyrics, because music is much stronger than the words you start with. Emotions are stronger in the music than the words, for me at least. I just wanted to find words that reflect what the music brings."

While the group had a reputation as party animals, Julien has found a refuge in Ste. Ursule.

"I had never lived in a little village before, but it's marvellous. Here, it's like you're working for a little artisan rather than a big corporation. Everybody has their own opinion on the affairs of the village, like the waterfalls and Hydro project here. It's not necessarily all good, but it's more like a real life. We're always in big cities around the world, so it's good to be among the trees, the birds, the butterflies, to appreciate life. It's the first time I've had a dog and it's droll to live with an animal, to study the ways of an animal."

Finally, the burning question: What does Malajube mean in English? "It's a really, really rare frog disease," band members explained to interviewers around the world. (Or as Charlebois lamentably sang in one of his only English songs: "I'm a frog ... kiss me.") Seriously, folks, Malajube is a made-up word that means absolutely nothing. And, to get Zen about it, everything. Simply, enjoy.

rodriguez.music@gmail.com

Malajube performs Tuesday, Wednesday and March 25 at La Tulipe, 4530 Papineau Ave. Tickets cost $16.95. Tuesday and Wednesday's shows are sold out. Call 514-790-1245 or see www.admission.com.

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MORE ON MALAJUBE
Watch a clip of Malajube performing the song Les Collemboles, and read Juan Rodriguez's review of Labyrinthes.

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